DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 262 CS 510 314

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TITLE Teaching and Disappointment.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (51st, Minneapolis, MN, April 12-15, 2000).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Emotional Adjustment; Higher Education; *Loneliness; *Teacher Morale; Teacher Persistence; *Teacher Welfare; Teaching Conditions; *Teaching Experience; *Teaching (Occupation); Tenure
IDENTIFIERS *Perspective (Psychology); Teacher Isolation

ABSTRACT

In several problematic college composition teaching scenarios, loss of faith in possibility is best described through the concept of disappointment. By articulating the nature of disappointments, instructors might develop an understanding of the collectivity of their experiences which would thus help to change such scenarios. The context of academic disappointments includes many factors: the loneliness of academic life; building or failure to build interpersonal relations; necessity of thinking differently from the norm; or inability to accept what is different. Instructors need to place disappointments in context by viewing them in perspective of all positives and negatives of academic life and by viewing them beyond mere personal occurrences. College teachers at all levels need to use disappointment to interrupt the politics of loneliness by: (1) discussing disappointments and making them disciplinary rather than personal; (2) recognizing the emotional aspects of teaching; and (3) realizing the need to acknowledge and respect interpersonal differences. (EF)

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Teaching and Disappointment

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CCCC 2000, Minneapolis

Scenario #1:
An experienced history teacher in a local community college is pursuing a Master's degree in English. She enrolls in the Teaching Composition course designed to give graduate students training for the classroom. In this class where a process-based, collaborative pedagogy is endorsed, she excels and seems to understand the basic principles underlying student-centered pedagogy. During her first semester teaching freshman composition, she speaks to the Director about unruly students in her class. Students, in turn, complain to the Director because the teacher has failed to explain her grading criteria. She attaches an evaluation form to student papers and assigns points to the students' ability to write grammatically correct sentences, organize ideas, and so forth. At the bottom, she assigns a grade based on the percentages, excluding suggestions for revising content. In the middle of the semester—after students challenge her in class and even go so far as to say that she doesn't know what she's doing—the teacher, visibly shaken, hands in her resignation to the Director of Composition.

Scenario #2:
A recent graduate of a doctoral program lands his first job at a small, private liberal arts school where he is one of two faculty in rhetoric and composition. Prior to the beginning of his appointment, he is assured that he will be able to teach a range of courses in addition to freshman composition. When he arrives, he finds that not only is he scheduled to teach three sections of composition both semesters of his first year, but is also expected to replace the recently fired WPA during his second year. Meanwhile, he worries that he will be too busy teaching and administering to meet the publication requirements for tenure.

Scenario #3:
After a particularly lackluster day in a freshman research-writing class, a student who misunderstood the day's assignment approaches the teacher after class. He tells her that she gave unclear directions and that her expectations for the assignment are unreasonable. As he becomes more angered, he flatly states that he's learning nothing in her class, a point that he attributes to her uncreative teaching style. He exclaims, "You've got to do something differently! I can't learn this way." The teacher silently wonders if *any* of her students are learning *anything*. Though she realizes this is only one student's opinion, she feels like he has seen through her and figured out that she's incompetent.

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The general aspects of these scenarios are probably familiar to all of us, though undoubtedly in varying degrees. Perhaps most familiar is the theme of collapsed possibility that too often circumscribes the work we do, or try to do, in our daily lives. The collapse may be brought on by a sudden experience of being overwhelmed by a particular problem, the sheer enormity of the work we are asked to do, or by the bold challenges—warranted or not—to our competency as teachers, administrators, and quite simply, as people with feelings. Whatever the impetus for the collapse, I want to suggest here that the loss of faith in possibility is best

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described through the concept of disappointment. Further, I believe that by articulating the nature of our disappointments, we might develop a better understanding of how our personal experiences have a collective identity. This understanding is "better" because it can help us to reflect on our work with a view toward changing those things that appear to be unchangeable, making difference unthinkable.

The concept of disappointment is inevitably connected to hope and the experience of disappointed hope. Hope, as psychologist William Lynch has written, "is always imagining what is not yet seen, or a way out of difficulty, or a wider perspective for life or thought" (23). Lynch continues, noting that hope not only imagines, "it imagines *with*" (23). That is, in his understanding, hope is an act of mutuality—an act of collaboration between members of a community. It is collaborative in the sense that one's vision for what might be is within the realm of *the possible* in a given community. Disappointment, in contrast, develops from a sense of hopelessness stemming from *the impossible*, or from what is made to *seem* impossible. From this perspective, disappointment is both a failure of imagination—a failure to imagine possibilities beyond those that appear to be "fixed"—as well as what Thomas Dumm identifies as "diminished faith in others" (56). The personal and professional danger of disappointment is that it may itself become a "fixed" stance, eventually hardening into disillusionment, resignation, passivity in the face of new, ever-changing situations. Dumm, a political scientist, writes about this very danger: "Sometimes disappointment deepens, encompasses such a wide scope that it overmatches our prior expectations, overwhelms our abilities, and threatens to shade into a more general disillusion that would stop us cold. Thus one ethical task of critical thinking might be to

steer us through our disappointment; to prevent it from turning into a permanent disillusionment; to make of our disappointment a plausible beginning, rather than a certain ending" (57).

Just how *can* critical thinking help us to see disappointments as beginnings, as occasions for renewal and re-appointment rather than dis-appointment? Before addressing this question, I'd like to sketch a bit more the context in which academic disappointment develops. A central part of this context must be the loneliness that academic life inevitably breeds. Whether this loneliness derives from the fact that we must go where the jobs are—often situating us far away from family and friends, not to mention airports that would take us to them—or that we may be the only compositionist (or theorist, multiculturalist, feminist, etc.) in a department, or that we find ourselves working in small towns isolated from cultural diversity and stimulation, it is clear that academia can be an extraordinarily lonely place.

Loneliness, however, is more than a physical place that we occupy. It can describe the relations we build, or fail to build, with others—especially those with whom we do not agree or who we view as occupying a place of such remote difference that any relation seems impossible. Connected to this point is that sometimes, in the name of self-preservation and principled thinking, loneliness must be *chosen*. In her influential essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Audre Lorde comments on the strategic necessity of choosing loneliness. She notes that survival means "learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish" (112). In Lorde's explication, choosing to stand alone and differentiate one's position from existing ones—too often perceived as solidified commonplaces beyond question—is sometimes necessary in order

to effect change. The difficulty of this position has to do with the inevitable loneliness that comes from standing alone, "unpopular and sometimes reviled." Such positions easily invite our superiors to make our lives difficult on both the daily level of teaching, and the institutional level of attaining tenure, securing grants, and serving on influential committees. Yet, choosing loneliness may sometimes be the most viable and ethical response to disappointment in that it has the potential to be both active and politically engaged.

While *choosing* loneliness can be a political strategy and a form of self-preservation, *participating* in a politics of loneliness that denies difference can engender disconnected relations between self and other. I refer here to a loneliness that refuses to acknowledge people-not-like-me as well as different ways of thinking about knowledge, teaching, hiring practices, and so forth. In Lynn Worsham's formulation of whiteness as a politics of loneliness, she describes "a loneliness so profound that, in refusing to recognize and respect difference, it has never truly admitted the possibility of other people" (341). In addition to this profound refusal to acknowledge difference, an academic politics of loneliness also fails to admit changing realities that circumscribe our work and new ways of thinking that these changes require. As such, there is a tendency to resist change because, among other things, it may not seem necessary to those who are not directly effected by a particular problem. Engineering a significant change in the employment of part-time faculty, for instance, would require tenured and tenure-track faculty to come together and think beyond our own positions in order to envision a different future. This envisioning—this ability to have hope for the future of our profession—is key to making difference a priority that is vital to our survival. It requires us to demythologize the politics of

loneliness by seeing ourselves in connection, rather than in distinction, to those we learn to see as outside the parameters of our work lives.

Loneliness can function as a seed-bed for disappointment, the experience of feeling dispossessed of power, agency, and the capacity to make a difference. It is not only common to experience disappointment in academia or to witness the disappointments experienced by those around us, but also to become *accustomed* to, even to *expect*, disappointment so that intervening in the conditions that create it often becomes unthinkable. Returning to the three scenarios sketched at the beginning of this paper, we see the overwhelmed new teacher resign her position, the new Assistant Professor adapt to untenable working conditions, and the challenged teacher internalize her failure, creating uncertainty about her competency. These responses are not inherently bad or unproductive—the latter one, for instance, may generate useful reflection on classroom practice. The point here is that we might begin to think about how disappointment contributes to our experiences as teachers and thus can be seen as part of the fabric of academic life. It is not the only thread woven into the fabric of our work, but is certainly an important stitch in the affective dimensions of teaching.

When we view our personal upsets as merely personal, we fail to see the systemic quality of our loss of faith. In the current era of budget crunches, rising numbers of adjunct faculty, the looming corporatization of the academy, and increased workloads, it seems to me absolutely vital that we learn to articulate our disappointments in a larger context. This will help us to resist the tendency to internalize our failures—cataloging them as reminders of personal inadequacy—and to unthink the competitiveness of academia by seeing ourselves as connected to others who share similar experiences of disappointment and loss of faith. We need to develop a collective

consciousness about the issues that impel us to lose faith in one another, disempowering us to create change. I'd like to suggest here several ways that we might use disappointment as an occasion for interrupting the politics of loneliness. First and most obvious, we need to talk, write, and theorize about the disappointments we experience, making them part of our disciplinary conversations. This may include more accounts of classroom practices and the institutional constraints placed upon teachers, from tenured to tenure-track to adjunct to graduate student teachers. By doing so, we may develop a better sense of ourselves in relation to others, while also enabling us to identify systemic problems that we, as a collective, can indeed change.

Second, we need a more developed commitment to describing the affective dimensions of teaching. Teaching needs to be recognized as a form of intellectual *and* emotional labor that shapes and is shaped by institutional attitudes toward students, scholarship, administrative work, collegiality, and so forth. In other words, part of an institutional or departmental "tone" develops from its members' affective relations to their work. This tone, in turn, communicates a sense of what is possible and impossible, thinkable and unthinkable. If tone may be said to reveal something about the emotional life of a department, then an important task before us is to identify and delineate the factors that lead communities of teachers and scholars to develop fossilized thinking or a loss of faith in other people and in the profession as a whole. We need to understand how individual feelings of hopelessness and despair, in other words, are part of what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling."

And finally, if we are to intervene in the politics of loneliness, we must vigilantly speak about the need to acknowledge and respect differences. For progressive intellectuals, it is nothing new to find ourselves working within a system that fiercely defends and justifies its

continued exclusion of difference. And by *difference* I do not mean only the exclusion of diverse people and literature from our departments and classrooms—though this surely is one of my meanings—but also hiring practices and administrative policies that fail to respond imaginatively to changing work conditions. This failure of imagination, as I understand it, signifies a learned refusal to conceptualize revised priorities and commitments which, in the lore of a department, may represent unchangeable, hopeless causes.

If disappointment is intrinsically connected to hope, then we need to find concrete ways to return to the sense of hope that brought us to this profession in the first place. Teaching, as an ideal, has always seemed to me to require hope for possibility and change. Yet, daily disappointments often obscure the possibility of making active change, instead engendering exhaustion, defensiveness, and guilt. In a different context, Ann Russo observes, "guilt and feelings of hopeless responsibility lead many of us to passivity and/or defensiveness, both of which maintain our position of power" (308). In the end, resigning oneself to disappointment is a way of supporting oppressive power relations by refusing to imagine new possibilities and to act responsibly in the face of outmoded ideologies, bad politics, and injustices of all kinds. This resignation can also be a retreat into an individualism that obscures connections between self and other and that, in many cases, "allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts of omission to reinforce their dominance" (Alcoff 20). Hope, in contrast, requires imaginative, expansive thinking that dares to unthink those disheartening aspects of our profession to which we have grown accustomed—aspects that we carry around with us in our classrooms, departmental committees, personal lives, and professional meetings such as this one.

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